

The Enigma of Benedict Arnold

by James Henretta



Benedict Arnold was different: a **military hero** for both sides in the same war. He began his career as an American Patriot in May 1775, when he and **Ethan Allen** led the brigade that captured Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain.

Arnold's heroics continued in September, when he led an expedition of 1,150 riflemen against Quebec, the capital of British Canada. The American commander drove his men hard through the Maine wilderness, overcoming leaky boats, spoiled provisions, treacherous rivers, and near starvation to arrive at Quebec in November, his force reduced to 650 men.

These losses did not deter Arnold. Joined by General Richard Montgomery, who had arrived with 300 troops after capturing Montreal, Arnold's forces attacked the strongly fortified city, only to have the assault end in disaster. A hundred Americans were killed, including Montgomery; 400 were captured; and many were wounded, including Arnold, who fell as he stormed over a barricade, a ball through his leg.

Quebec was only the beginning. For the next five years Arnold served the Patriot side with distinction in one battle after another, including a dangerous assault against the center of the British line at Saratoga, where he was again wounded in the leg. No general was more imaginative than Arnold, no field officer more daring, no soldier more courageous.

Yet Arnold has gone down in history not as a hero but as a villain, a military traitor who, as commander of the American fort at West Point, New York, in 1780, schemed to hand it over to the British.

Of his role in this conspiracy there is no doubt. His British contact, Major John Andre, was caught with incriminating documents in Arnold's handwriting, including routes of access to the fort. Arnold, fleeing down the Hudson River on a British ship, defended his treason in a letter to Washington, stating that "love to my country actuates my present conduct, however it may appear inconsistent to the world, who very seldom judge right of any man's actions."

But judge we must. Why did Arnold desert the cause for which he had fought so gallantly and twice been wounded? Was there any justification for his conduct?

When the fighting began at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, Arnold was thirty-four, an apothecary and minor merchant in New Haven, Connecticut, but also a militia captain and ardent Patriot. "Good God," he had exclaimed at the time of the Boston Massacre, "are the Americans all asleep and tamely giving up their Liberties"? Eager to support the rebellion, Arnold coerced the Town's selectmen into supplying powder and ball to his men and promptly marched them to Boston, which was under siege by the New England militia. On the way Arnold thought up the attack on Fort Ticonderoga (realizing that the fort's cannon could be used to force the British out of Boston) and persuaded the Massachusetts Committee of Safety to approve his plan and make him a colonel. That done, he raced to New York to take command so that the glory would be his and not go to Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys. The victory achieved, Arnold submitted an inflated claim for expenses (\$ 1,060 in Massachusetts currency, or about \$60,000 today) and protested vehemently when the suspicious legislators closely examined each item.

These events illuminated Arnold's great strengths and fatal flaws and were prophetic of his ultimate fate. He was bold and creative, a man who sized up a situation and acted quickly. He was ambitious and extravagant, an egocentric man who craved power and the financial rewards that came with it. He was intrepid and ruthless, willing to risk his life "and the lives of others" to get what he wanted.

Such men often are resented as much as they are admired, and so it was with Arnold. At Quebec some New England officers accused him of arrogance and tried to withdraw from his command, but Congress rewarded the intrepid colonel by making him a brigadier general. When Arnold again distinguished himself in battle in early 1777 "having his horse shot out from under him" Congress promoted him to major general and gave him a new horse "as a token of their admiration of his gallant conduct." But then, in the middle of the struggle at Saratoga, General Horatio Gates, the American commander, relieved Arnold of his command, partly for insubordination and partly because Gates considered him a "pompous little fellow." Washington rewarded Arnold nonetheless, appointing him commandant at Philadelphia in July 1778, after the British evacuation of the city.

By then Arnold was an embittered man, disdainful of his fellow officers and resentful toward Congress for not promoting him more quickly and to even higher rank. A widower, he threw himself into the social life of the city, holding grand parties, courting and marrying Margaret Shippen, "a talented young woman of good family, who at nineteen, was half his age" and falling deeply into debt. Arnold's extravagance drew him into shady financial schemes and into disrepute with Congress, which investigated his accounts and recommended a court-martial. "Having ... become a cripple in the

service of my country, I little expected to meet [such] ungrateful returns," he complained to Washington.

Faced with financial ruin, uncertain of future promotion, and disgusted with congressional politics, Arnold made a fateful decision: he would seek fortune and fame in the service of Great Britain. With cool calculation, he initiated correspondence with Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander, promising to deliver West Point and its 3,000 defenders for \$20,000 sterling silver (about \$1 million today), a momentous act that he hoped would spark the collapse of the American cause. Persuading Washington to place the fort under his command, Arnold moved in September 1780 to execute his audacious plan, only to see it fail when Andre, was captured. As Andre, was executed as a spy, Arnold received \$ 6,000 from the British government and appointment as a brigadier general.



Benedict Arnold turns over the plans of West Point to British Major John Andre.

Arnold served George III with the same skill and daring he had shown in the Patriot cause. In 1781 he led devastating strikes on Patriot supply depots: In Virginia he looted Richmond and destroyed munitions and grain intended for the American army opposing Lord Cornwallis; in Connecticut he burned ships, warehouses, and much of the town of New London, a major port for Patriot privateers.

In the end, Benedict Arnold's "moral failure lay not in his disenchantment with the American cause" for many other officers returned to civilian life disgusted with the decline in republican virtue and angry over their failure to win a guaranteed pension from Congress. Nor did his infamy stem from his transfer of allegiance to the British side, for other Patriots chose to become Loyalists, sometimes out of principle but just as often for personal gain. Arnold's perfidy lay in the abuse of his position of authority and trust: he would betray West Point and its garrison "and if necessary the entire American war effort" to secure his own success. His treason was not that of a principled man but that of a selfish one, and he never lived that down. Hated in America as a consort of "Beelzebub ... the Devil," Arnold was treated with coldness and even contempt in Britain. He died as he lived, a man without a country.

The Enigma of Benedict Arnold Questions

I. Early on in the American Revolution Benedict Arnold rose quickly through the ranks of the Continental Army. Below are some examples of his brave service. Complete each sentence by filling in the blank space with the correct word.

- 1) Benedict Arnold rose to fame early in the war when he and _____ lead the Green Mountain Boys to capture British Fort _____.
- 2) In September of 1775, Arnold led an expedition of 1,150 riflemen against _____, the capital of British Canada.
- 3) The march to Quebec was so difficult that _____ of Arnold's men died and when they reached Quebec Arnold only had _____ men left to fight.
- 4) Arnold was injured during the attack on Quebec when he was shot through his _____.
- 5) Arnold was also famous for leading a dangerous assault against the center of the British line during the battle of _____, where he was again wounded in the leg.
- 6) In the article the author states that "No general was more _____ than Arnold, no field officer more _____, no soldier more _____."

II. Despite all of his bravery, Benedict Arnold had several flaws that would keep him from becoming an American hero.

- 7) Benedict Arnold would go down in history as a villain because he took part in a plot to turn over _____ to the British.
- 8) There is no doubt of Arnold's role in the conspiracy because his British contact, _____, was caught with incriminating documents in Arnold's _____.
- 9) After the Battle of Ticonderoga, Arnold wanted the Massachusetts Committee of Safety to reimburse him for his expenses. He should have been paid \$ _____ but he inflated his claims so that he would receive \$ _____.
- 10) Arnold became resentful toward Congress for not _____ him more quickly and to even higher _____.

Name: _____ Section: _____ Date: _____

- 11) With cool calculation, he _____ correspondence with Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander, promising to deliver _____ and its _____ defenders for \$_____ sterling silver.
- 12) Today, \$20,000 sterling silver worth roughly _____.
- 13) Arnold hoped that the British capture of West Point would be a momentous act that he hoped would _____ of the American cause.
- 14) According to the last paragraph of the reading, Benedict Arnold is different that other traitors who left the Patriot cause and joined the British ranks. How is Benedict Arnold different? Answer in complete sentences.
